

break down old barriers between agencies. While no legislation is perfect and I believe the Collins/Lieberman version of Intelligence Reform legislation passed in the Senate this week is a better solution, I stand in support of H.R. 10 and vote for this bill today. These reforms move us towards a safer and stronger America.

In the course of the House debate of H.R. 10, many concerns have been raised about immigration and I would like to speak about this particular component of the bill. I remain convinced that illegal immigration is a serious issue that needs to be addressed by the Congress. People who circumvent our Nation's laws and enter this country illegally should not be here. I believe this is central to our national and economic security for hard working Americans and others who come to this country legally.

But I also believe it is important that we remember the purpose of this bill and what brought us to this historic point in time. The purpose of this bill is to reform our Intelligence Community; to lay the foundation we need to protect Americans today. The 9/11 Commission specifically addressed Intelligence Reform. With five Republicans and five Democrats, the Commission spent 20 months on an exhaustive examination of millions of pages of documents, countless interviews and hearings, and hundreds of hours of debate—and produced a bipartisan, unanimous list of 41 recommendations. This report provided the Congress with a real, workable and effective blueprint that became the foundation of the Collins/Lieberman bill that passed the Senate 96–2 on October 6, 2004.

So while I applaud some of the measures in H.R. 10 and have ultimately chosen to vote for this bill because it provides many measures to protect all Americans and our communities, I remain concerned about some of the extraneous provisions it includes like immigration. There are enormous differences between illegal aliens and legal immigrants. There are enormous differences between immigration and terrorism. All of these issues are incredibly important to the fabric of our Nation and deserve to be considered in full and separately.

CORRECTING THE WASHINGTON POST RECORD ON THE VA

HON. CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, October 8, 2004

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to set the record straight on what is happening to recently-separated veterans who seek benefits and services from the Department of Veterans Affairs. There has been significant progress made in the last 3 years; some of that progress was reported correctly in a Washington Times article this past Sunday, but the headline in a piece from the Washington Post that appeared on the same day and was quoted by one of my colleagues on Monday made it seem that VA is totally unprepared to provide disability, compensation, rehabilitation and other benefit to America's veterans.

It is inaccurate to describe the current inventory of 323,000 claims for VA benefits as

a "backlog," if by that term you mean to imply that veterans are waiting unnecessarily for an answer from VA. The truth is that at any given time, the VA is actively processing more than 250,000 claims while receiving more than 70,000 new and reopened claims each month. It's normal for the VA to have a working inventory of at least 250,000 claims.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, at the request of this President, Congress provided additional funding to increase the number of VA claims processors by more than 1,300 since he took office. When we authorized these new employees, we effectively overstaffed the VA so that experienced employees would be available to train these new employees without an adverse effect on the timeliness of claims processing. These new employees are now fully trained and productive, and there should be no reduction in services to veterans.

With respect to meeting veterans' benefits needs, the Washington Post article cited recently one of my colleagues failed to mention any of the documented improvements in VA claims processing. In the past four years, the VA has reduced the average time to decide disability claims from a high of 233 days to 160 days, reduced the percentage of pending claims for over six months from 48% in 2002 to 21% now, reduced rating-related claims from 432,000 in 2002 to 323,000 currently and is on track to meet the VA goal of 250,000.

Most importantly, VA has increased the number of claims decisions from an average of 40,000 per month in 2001 to nearly 70,000 in 2004. These are significant accomplishments by the Bush Administration on behalf of veterans, and all of us should be proud to have supported the increased funding which the Administration requested to make this possible.

Mr. Speaker, the Washington Post article lead readers to believe that there was some delay in providing benefits to a soldier on active duty, and that the VA is unresponsive to America's veterans. In fact, I am advised that VA has already evaluated this particular soldier's disabilities and will begin awarding benefits on the first day he is discharged from the Army. As all of my colleagues should know, VA cannot provide veterans benefits to a soldier until he or she is discharged from active duty.

The Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense are working hard to ensure that military members have a "seamless transition" from active duty; this means prompt decisions on claims for disability benefits and quality health care when needed. Even before servicemembers are discharged, VA provides transition services at 136 military bases so that servicemembers can ask questions and be briefed about their VA benefits and how to file for those benefits as they approach discharge. The VA has even assigned its own professional staff to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda and the Landstuhl Army Medical Center in Germany to ensure our wounded American heroes will be aware of their VA health care and benefits long before they are discharged.

Mr. Speaker it is often said that you shouldn't argue with an entity that buys ink by the barrel, but the Washington Post has its facts wrong in this case. This is not that surprising since the Post has not reported on any of the hearings—and we've had many—on

these issues held by either the House Committee on Veterans Affairs which I chair and the House Armed Service Committee during the past year. Had they done so, their readers could have learned about the problems which have faced separating service members in the past and what is being done today to prevent those problems from occurring in the future.

Both the Armed Forces and VA are working more closely together than in any previous conflict to ensure that the benefits which service members earned by their faithful service are delivered in a timely and compassionate manner. Members who attended those hearings learned that while mistakes have occurred, no one is more dedicated to ensuring that these deserving veterans than the current VA Secretary Anthony Principi and his able staff. The VA, the Congress and the President are all working together to make sure that our newest generation of combat veterans are taken care of. They deserve nothing less.

PERSONAL EXPLANATION

HON. DARRELL E. ISSA

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, October 8, 2004

Mr. ISSA. Mr. Speaker, if I had been present for the vote on the conference report for H.R. 4200, "The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2005," and conference report for H.R. 4567, "The Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act for FY 2005," I would have voted "yea" on both.

H.R. 1047, MISCELLANEOUS TRADE AND TECHNICAL CORRECTIONS ACT

HON. PHILIP M. CRANE

OF ILLINOIS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, October 8, 2004

Mr. CRANE. Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 1047, the Miscellaneous Trade and Technical Corrections Act of 2004. This important, bipartisan legislation is long overdue, and I am pleased we have the opportunity to consider the conference report this evening.

H.R. 1047 is a compendium of trade provisions drawn largely from legislation introduced by individual Members. The bill contains provisions involving the temporary suspension of duties on narrowly defined products, miscellaneous trade items, and technical corrections to the Trade and Development Act of 2000.

There are a number of provisions in this bill that are noteworthy, including several that I have long championed. For instance, I am pleased that the legislation follows in the tradition of both the 2000 and 2002 Trade Acts, by including a reduction of the tariff for certain types of wool used in the production of men's suits.

This reduction in tariffs is important not only as a matter of trade policy, but also to suitmakers across the country, who not too long ago saw their industry decimated by high tariffs. Reducing these tariffs has stabilized the domestic industry, and nowhere is this more apparent than at Hart Marx, the only publicly-